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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the spread of mentoring in the United States, obstacles to realizing the potential of mentoring as a vehicle of reform, needed research, and selected issues of policy and practice. While the education community understands that mentors have a positive effect on teacher retention, the question of what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result of mentoring remains open. For example, the culture of teaching encourages autonomy and noninterference; therefore, mentor teachers have little experience with the core activities of mentoring, such as observing and discussing teaching with colleagues. If novices are to learn the ways of thinking and acting associated with new kinds of teaching, they must be placed with mentors who are already reformers in their schools or classrooms and develop collaborative contexts. To inform mentoring policy and practice, comprehensive, empirical research is needed, including studies of mentoring and its effects on teaching and teacher retention, how mentors learn to work with novices in productive ways, what structures and resources facilitate that work, and how mentoring fits into broader frameworks of professional development and accountability. (Contains nine references.) (LL)

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# TEACHER MENTORING: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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by

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## Teacher Mentoring: A Critical Review

**Sharon Feiman-Nemser**

Mentoring is a critical topic in education today and a favored strategy in U.S. policy initiatives focused on teacher induction. Besides creating new career opportunities for veteran teachers, assigning mentors to work with beginning teachers represents an improvement over the abrupt and unassisted entry into teaching that characterizes the experience of many novices. Still, the promise of mentoring goes beyond helping novices survive their first year of teaching. If mentoring is to function as a strategy of reform, it must be linked to a vision of good teaching, guided by an understanding of teacher learning, and supported by a professional culture that favors collaboration and inquiry. This Digest examines the spread of mentoring in the United States, obstacles to realizing the potential of mentoring as a vehicle of reform, needed research, and selected issues of policy and practice.

**The Spread of Mentoring**

Since the early 1980s, when mentoring burst onto the educational scene as part of a broad movement aimed at improving education, policymakers and educational leaders have pinned high hopes on mentoring as a vehicle for reforming teaching and teacher education. Concerned about the rate of attrition during the first 3 years of teaching and aware of the problems faced by beginning teachers, policymakers saw the logic of providing on-site support and assistance to novices during their first year of teaching (Little, 1990). The scale of mentoring has increased rapidly, with over 30 states mandating some form of mentored support for beginning teachers.

The mentoring idea has also been extended to the preservice level. Proposals for the redesign of teacher preparation (e.g., Holmes Group, 1990) call for teacher candidates to work closely with experienced teachers in internship sites and restructured school settings such as professional development schools. The hope is that experienced teachers will serve as mentors and models, helping novices learn new pedagogies and socializing them to new professional norms. This vision of mentoring depends on school-university partnerships that support professional development for both mentors and teacher candidates.

**A Cautionary Note**

Enthusiasm for mentoring has not been matched by clarity about the purposes of mentoring. Nor have claims about mentoring been subjected to rigorous empirical scrutiny. The education community understands that mentors have a positive affect on teacher retention, but that leaves open the question of what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result. Just as research on student teaching highlights the conservative influence of cooperating teachers and school cultures on novices' practice, so some studies show that mentors promote conventional norms and practices, thus limiting reform (e.g., Feiman-Nemser, Parker, & Zeichner, 1993).

These findings should not surprise us. Mentor teachers have little experience with the core activities of mentoring—observing and discussing teaching with colleagues. Most teachers work alone, in the privacy of their classroom, protected by norms of autonomy and noninterference. Nor does the culture of teaching encourage distinctions among teachers based on expertise. The "persistence of privacy," the lack of opportunities to observe and discuss each other's practice, and the tendency to treat all teachers as equal limits what mentors can do, even when working with novices (Little, 1990).

In addition, few mentor teachers practice the kind of conceptually oriented, learner-centered teaching advocated by reformers (Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993). If we want mentors to help novices learn the ways of thinking and acting associated with new kinds of teaching, then we have to place them with mentors who are already reformers in their schools and classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 1991), or develop collaborative contexts where mentors and novices can explore new approaches together.

**Needed Research**

Before 1990, the literature on mentoring consisted mainly of program descriptions, survey-based evaluations, definitions of mentoring, and general discussions of mentors' roles and responsibilities. Researchers did not conceptualize mentors' work in relation to novices' learning or study the practice of mentoring directly. Reviewing the literature, Little (1990) found "few comprehensive studies well-informed by theory and designed to examine in depth the context, content and consequences of mentoring" (p. 297).

Since 1990, some researchers have begun to fill in those gaps. In one comparison of two beginning teacher programs, researchers documented striking differences in the way mentor teachers conceived of and carried out their work with novices. They linked these differences in mentors' perspectives and practices to differences in role expectations, working conditions, program orientations, and mentor preparation (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993). In a reform-oriented preservice program, Cochran-Smith (1991) studied the conversations of student teachers and experienced teachers in weekly, school-site meetings at four urban schools. She shows how these conversations, occasions for group mentoring, expose novices to broad themes of reform through discussions of highly contextualized problems of practice. Between 1991-95, researchers at the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning at Michigan State carried out a comparative, cross-cultural study of mentoring in selected sites in the United States, England, and China. The study sought insights about learning to teach, mentoring practices, and the conditions that enable novices and mentors to work together in productive ways. Preliminary findings underscore the influence of mentors' beliefs about learning to teach, the challenges of

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learning to teach for understanding, and the impact of different contextual factors (e.g., school culture, national policies) on mentors' practice and novices' learning.

To inform mentoring policy and practice, we need more direct studies of mentoring and its affects on teaching and teacher retention, especially in urban settings where turnover is high. We also need to know more about how mentors learn to work with novices in productive ways, what structures and resources enable that work, and how mentoring fits into broader frameworks of professional development and accountability.

**Thorny Issues of Policy and Practice**

According to conventional wisdom, mentors should "assist not assess" on the grounds that novices are more likely to share problems and ask for help if mentors do not evaluate them. The issue is not so straightforward. Some state-level programs use a team approach in which mentor teachers fulfill the support function while others (e.g., a principal or professor) judge the novice's performance for purposes of employment or certification. Other programs give mentor teachers a prominent role in these gatekeeping decisions on the grounds of professionalism and accountability. Clearly different ways of resolving the assistance vs. assessment issue involve different costs and benefits for mentors and novices, for states and districts, and for the profession of teaching.

A second issue is whether something as personal as a mentoring relationship can be formalized in a program. Should mentors be chosen or assigned? Skeptics might consider the possibility that what a novice learns from a mentor depends as much on what they do together as it does on the affective quality of their relationship (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Still, mentoring relationships are bound to be unpredictable. Program developers may be wise to focus on creating optimal conditions rather than trying to make optimal matches (Tauer, 1995).

A third issue is time—time to mentor and time to learn to mentor. Some programs hire retired teachers. Others release mentor teachers from some or all of their classroom responsibilities. Still others expect mentors to combine mentoring with full-time teaching. Besides sending different messages about the purposes of mentoring, these arrangements create different situations in which mentors can learn and apply their skills. Most mentoring programs provide some orientation or training. Common topics include clinical supervision, research on effective teaching, beginning teacher concerns, and theories of adult learning. Less common but no less important are opportunities for mentors to analyze their own beliefs about learning to teach and to articulate their practical knowledge of teaching. While training usually occurs before mentors take up their new responsibilities, mentors are more likely to develop their practice as mentors if they also have opportunities to discuss questions and problems that arise in the course of their work with novices.

**Summary**

By promoting observation and conversation about teaching, mentoring can help teachers develop tools for continuous improvement. If learning to teach in reform-minded ways is the focus of this joint work, mentoring will also fulfill its promise as an instrument of reform. Unfortunately budget shortfalls in the 1990s may be leading districts and states to eliminate mentoring programs before this possibility is realized.

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